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FAMILY-CENTERED RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: A MILITARY MINISTRY

What the sociologists of the 60's predicted is rapidly unfolding: American family life is undergoing dramatic change. Traditional roles and relationships have been re-defined: malefemale; child-parent; nuclear-extended family. New demands give birth to dramatic changes in family life-styles. These changes continue to require new and flexible responses from religious ministry, most especially from the military chaplains.

It is my thesis that the military chaplain can have a most enduring effect on family enrichment and stability when he focuses a significant part of his ministry on the family itself. A familycentered program of worship and of religious education provides not only knowledge, but a system of support for JudaicChristian family life values. In this article I plan to explore
what current research reflects as to the status and needs of
families and to point out that a family-centered religious education ministry is one of the most effective and far-reaching kinds
of approaches available to the chaplain as he struggles to interpret the rapid changes and pressures of modern life for the people
in his care.

The chaplain can have a significant impact on the military family family. His life style, his full time dedication, as well as his broad pastoral experience and educational background give him the expertise to grapple with the pressures and difficulties faced by families. The chaplain's ministry provides the healing for families in trouble, the voice that can challenge them to struggle for meaning in daily life. His presence and special ministry can educate families, encourage them, and be a source of hope and strength.

The chaplain is cognizant of economic pressure imposed on families and of the sociological data that affects his ministry. The constant escalating cost of living, the higher medical and retirement premiums, the cost of higher education, and countless other factors force long hours of work upon more members of the family. Statistically, more family members are employed than ever before and more breadwinners work several jobs in order to provide essentials, let alone luxuries.

Add to long hours of work the fact that this phenomenon takes more and more mothers out of the home when children most need them, and the pressures are compounded. Add also the demands for each family member to participate in numerous church groups, school events, service clubs, community ventures and one wonders how homes can be more than boarding houses. It is apparent why there are so few nuclear families in the traditional definition of that term. The discussion about extended leisure time and early retirement doesn't do much for those most vital years when the family needs the support of each member.

It is evident that the growing pressures on families often result in greater family independence and mobility. The American family is experiencing dramatic changes not only in these life styles but in their values system as well. Revoluntionary attitudes toward sex, marriage, purpose in life, achievement and success; changing styles of living evident among both Jews and Christians — all of these are frequently contrary to traditionally accepted values and all of them are being felt in the best of families.

During my own travels abroad it became clear that the changes taking place in family life, in attitudes and style of living, are not taking place only in the United States, but throughout most of the world. In Israel the complaint is heard that too many Jewish families are no longer faithful to the religious ways expected by tradition. Orthodox practice is often replaced with a nominal religious family commitment. Old-timers in Dublin complain of the

changing family structure, the curiosity for wild city life and changing morals of the young, the enchantment with everything except family life and responsibility. So, too, in Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Mexico and many other places. The same cries are heard: family life is changing and all too often the changes are viewed as unhealthy in the Judaic-Christian context.

The chaplain is concerned that the families of the military personnel do not escape these same throes of change that afflict their counterparts around the world. The military command has addressed itself to the apparent changes in family life and is vitally concerned about the welfare and the quality of military family life. Men and women can function well in military service only when the family environment is conducive to healthy functioning. Because most military assignments are relatively temporary by nature, the military family must find a source of stability within itself to carry to each new assignment. Roots in community do not last. Affiliation with local Church ties families into a more transcendent experience that can be transported, but even that degree of faith endures best when rooted in the family unit.

At no time in our American history has there been so much positive concern and public initiative for the better understanding of current family life and the commitment by professional people to search for ways to strengthen family life. Regardless of religious affiliation, most agree on the necessity of healthy family life, based on sound values for the good of this nation. We will indicate several programs that have addressed themselves to these concerns.

Acknowledging the fact that the family is presently the focus of nation-wide concern and study, numerous governmental and private groups are exploring ways for helpful involvement with families. Aware of the tensions and pressures felt by the family and wanting to "examine the strengths of American families, the difficulties they face, and the ways in which family life is affected by public policies" President Carter has announced a White House Conference on Families for 1981. Presently I am serving on the Utah Commission Planning for the White House Conference and its State Counterpart.

Recently, two other groups, the National Commission on Families and Public Policies, and the National Conference on Social Welfare, in a preliminary working paper "Families and Public Policies in the United States" (presented at the 105th Annual Forum of the National Conference, May, 1978) reflected on the broad issues and principles for public policy that influence family stability. It was felt that millions of dollars have been spent on remedial programs and that it is time for investment in positive efforts to strengthen families.

Another group, The United States Catholic Conference Ad Hoc Commission on Marriage and Family Life conducted a lengthy study of "The issues and problems confronting the American family so that..." the Church could respond to some of the most persistent problems affecting the Church, as well as the roots of our civil society." That study indicates that never before has the family faced such complex obstacles to unity and such temptations to abandon traditional values for expediency and materialism.

Focusing attention on the needs of the family and initiating action on its behalf, the United States Catholic Bishops have designated 1980 as a Family Year and have developed a <u>Plan of Pastoral Action for Family Ministry.</u> 3 Catholic clergy throughout the country are expected to bring the focus of local programs and the force of their commitment to strengthen the quality of the family life of their people.

In 1977 the Air Force emphasized ministry to families and the United States Air Force Chaplain Resource Board produced a study which is entitled "An Assessment of Family Life in the Air Force Environment". A According to commentators, the contents of that study apply not only to the Air Force but to all military families. The study states that there is evidence to substantiate the fact that the quality of military family life is deteriorating as rapidly as is the quality of family life in the civilian community. 5

The specific programs cited above are only a few that have recognized the problems of family life and have expressed concern. They have stimulated public awareness and are attempting to provide solutions. In the lives of military personnel, the chaplain is a key resource person for immediate and available assistance. His presence and proximity are positive factors that contribute immeasurably to helping families solve some of their daily problems in a value clarification way.

It is the chaplain who must provide the emphasis, leadership, and expertise for a family-centered growth in those values so essential to stable healthy family life. The chaplain knows that healthy family life is essential to the military. He knows that great amounts of money are spent to provide chaplains who not only conduct worship, but who minister to the families in their care. So, it is imperative in light of current statistics, that the military chaplain be concerned about the health of the family, both those who are active military and also those in the Reserves. The chaplain knows well, that if personnel is not enabled to function better in the service through healthy family relationships, the family too quickly becomes another source of pressure, tension and eventual disruption for the military person. The Chaplain is convinced that religious values, if integrated, will be a stabilizing influence for families that move frequently as a part of the military system.

One of the key vehicles at the chaplain's disposal is the chapel religious education program. Frequently that program focuses only on special interest or age groups. However, I am convinced that any program with a total family emphasis will better contribute to stabilizing and preserving, Judeo-Christian family values. Since of necessity there is a great deal of mobility among military families, relationships with the local church are too often temporary and shallow. The family needs to have a built-in stability and self-reliance which it carries from place to place. Otherwise, the military family disintegrates. Thus, a chapel program of ongoing religious education that involves the whole family, that cements family ties and one that provides a vision of strength and hope, is vital.

The Air Force study of Family life makes numerous observations regarding the problems and needs of military families. Available data from other sources indicates that these problems and needs are common not only to the military but also to civilian families. These reflections put into focus the reality that the military depends upon families and that chaplains are the key facilitators for developing a better quality of family life. The Air Force study cites six major areas of concern.

- 1. There is a rapidly increasing divorce rate among military couples and thus a decrease in the average length of marriage. The tradition of "working things out" even for the sake of the "kids", seems more and more unacceptable. The resultant human alienation and frustration are apparent. As expected, the earlier the marriage the greater the risk and associated problems. Statistics indicate that too many young people are not adequately prepared for the demands of married life, either emotionally, economically or spiritually.
- 2. The once traditionally close-knit, authoritarian family is becoming independent and oriented toward personal fulfillment. More and more each family member asserts his or her own independence with little regard for the undesirable effects on the total family.
- 3. The increasing rate of mobility fosters a rootlessness and loss of meaningful community identity. Because of this short stay life style many families feel there is little or no reason to become involved on the local scene. It becomes obvious that that if there is to be a meaningful life, it must depend more on

the self-contained family unit than on the community at large.

- 4. The modern stress on women's rights and changes in husband-wife roles, especially regarding the sources of financial support, significantly affect family life-style.
- 5. Statistics indicate that there is more pre-marriage permissive sexual activity, more liberal attitudes toward birth control and sexual activities traditionally viewed as religiously immoral. The atmosphere in which the family functions is often alien to that of the traditional Judaic-Christian moral values system. Hence, the family needs to create its own environment that is protective of its own traditions and values.
- 6. Likewise, many current family life-styles are foreign to the traditional Judaic-Christian heritage. Among recent phenomenon are:

<u>Singlehood</u>: often with the responsibility for raising children born of temporary relationships falling to a young working and single man or woman.

<u>Nuclear Family:</u> which has changed in concept to include both parents often working, and often one spouse holding down several jobs either to make ends meet or to provide luxuries.

Open Marriage: some couples individualize their contracts for their own version of married life. This style is well analyzed in the book Open Marriage by Nena and George O'Neill. 6 It leaves a great deal of freedom as a marriage form, but brings many problems as well.

Intimate Friendship Networks: there is no contracted marriage but couples live together. 7 Among the recent trends this is probably the most difficult for religious people to accept as a life-style and is one that invites serious social consequences.

In addition to the above, several other observations taken from military periodicals are descriptive of the realities facing modern family life:

- Men are often separated from their wives and families on military business, even in peacetime, for extensive periods of time. Such separation often causes tension and damages family relationships.
 It takes real strength to re-establish meaningful relationships once foundations have been disturbed.
- 2. There is a shift in family goals from those of basic survival to a quest for meaning and identity; anything that holds out the possibility of significant meaning for family members is more readily explored and accepted. ⁹ Thus, superficial generalities from a Chaplain are not sufficient for many today because they seek a deeper message for their lives.
- 3. Parents are less willing to entrust the full moral or intellectual education of their children to institutions, be they church, school or community programs. Parents are becoming more suspect of program content, critical of the values of the teachers and leaders, and want some voice. This can be healthy as it has been long recognized that home and personal relationships have more impact on the values and behavior patterns of young people than do those other institutions. ¹⁰ Parents themselves have come to see that the institutions just can't accept full responsibility for the value education of their clientele.
- More and more adults see the need of their own on-going education, both religious and civilian. The knowledge explosion

and the generation gap widen. Learning is no longer considered "over" with the reception of a diploma. We are truly becoming a "learning society". 11 Hence while some might find commitment to church family programs difficult, most will eventually adjust as they better understand and feel less threatened. Often parents can be motivated when programs are described as vehicles to narrow the generation gap between them and their children and to provide the up-dated knowledged for people to keep up with the world knowledge explosion.

Available studies indicate that in family life, military included, there is a need for strong emphasis on an integral education that can cement values so essential to family well-being.

The United States Catholic Conference Ad Hoc Commission on Marriage and Family Life recently completed a thorough study and analysis of family life in the United States. The study took the form of extensive grass roots consultation. The purpose was to determine a more effective Church approach to the complex issues affecting family life and marriage. The following issues reflected in the findings of that report tend to substantiate the conclusions of the Air Force and other military studies:

An increasing number of marriages is in trouble: there
is a significant increase in both military and civilian separations
and divorces; the resulting family disruption, which is gaining
momentum in society at large, reaps terrible effects. Permanency of
relationships is becoming obsolete for many, and stability has become less frequently present in the lives of the children.

- There is a dramatic change in male-female roles which significantly alter family relationships. Men seem to be more domestic in orientation as women enter competitive and professional employment.
- 3. Lacking, too, is an integrated <u>theology</u> of sexuality, of family and of marriage. Too often the church does not provide adequate thrust in this area. A clear theology of marriage and a practical, positive approach to married life spirituality could improve the quality of married life.
- 4. Christian values and religious goals are unimportant for too many families; the objective is fulfillment, recognition, and a whole new set of meaningful religious experiences.
- 5. Clergy competency and dynamic leadership in dealing with families needs to be revitalized. Programs that provide information and support systems for families need to be reinforced by the Chaplain.
- 6. A methodology needs to be developed whereby families can be helped to minister to themselves when secondary, outside help is inadequate. 12 "The issues and problems confronting the contemporary American family are vast and, at times, seem to be almost overwhelming. Consequently, to adequately deal with questions relating to family education and ministry involves strenuous preparation on the part of ministers. However, this effort is imperative if the church is to respond to some of the more persistent problems affecting the church, as well as the roots of our civil society, in an effective and significant manner". 13

The same USCC report ended with 45 proposals for strengthening the ministry of the church for families. Most of the proposals cross denominational lines and speak of strengthening family bonds and supports through church ministry.

The evidence is over-whelming that the family is in need of help and never more ready to accept it. The military chaplain as church leader is called to intensify efforts to support family life. The time spent during Saturday or Sunday worship is not adequate. An educational thrust for the family as a unit, rather than individual programs for children, wives, men, etc., can prepare families to better identify their own needs and to minister to themselves. The chaplain is the enabler for a clear family focus and the chapel family religious education program is an effective vehicle for meeting identified needs. If church ministry doesn't respond in time, the religious orientation of too many families will be lost. There are some who, in fact, are saying that church organization itself will survive only if it gears itself to serve the family unit more effectively. Many chaplains are convinced that the "value-system" approach is a positive and lasting approach.

During a trip to Israel I stayed with some fifty Jewish families in the Kubtz. The Kubtz is a commune type of living in which everyone participates in the life and work. The members assume responsibility for their collective needs and those of their children. Each family is held accountable for passing on the Jewish virtues, so rich in the tradition. In the Kubtz there is a sense of stability, unity, common purpose of life. What is taught there is lived. What is taught there inculcates a value system for life.

So, likewise, in the early days of Christianity the church was closely linked to the family. The Eucharist was celebrated in homes, the Scriptures studied there, the values clarified and lived. The Second Vatican Council re-stated for Catholics that tradition when it called the home the domestic church and in The Constitution On The Church challenges families to make Christ present in the world. The family provides the maximum opportunity for the continuing development and growth of each member. It is within the home that Christian values can be integrated into human living. ¹⁴

Another example of a family orientated life style is that of the L.D.S. Church. It places great emphasis on the family as the primary source for transmitting Mormon values. The Family Home Evening and accompanying programs are effective tools to that end.

15 Joseph Fielding Smith, while President of the LDS Church, stated in the introduction to the first manual for Home Evenings published by the church in 1972:

"The holding of Family Home Evenings, which has long been encouraged by the church, was given added emphasis in 1965....

Since then the spiritual lives of many families have been enriched by their gathering together once each week in a family centered experience."

In other denominations there has been a struggle to develop religious sensitivity to the needs of minority groups and to develop special programs to meet their unique needs. The family emphasis is an effective approach for meeting the needs of minority groups, especially for the Mexican American. At the San Antonio,

Texas, Mexican-American Seminar on Religious Education, held
April 1, 1971, and sponsored by the Religious Education Department of the Texas Catholic Conference, it was stated that effective programs for the Mexican-Americans must relate to the culture of the people. It was concluded that Mexican-American culture is touched religiously most effectively within the context of the family. The most meaningful religious symbols of the Mexican-American are celebrated in conjunction with family gatherings. ¹⁶

After reflecting on the changing family, subject to so many pressures today, and looking at the advantages to be found in a family-centered religious education program, it remains but to choose the best program models. As would be expected, there are a number of family-centered programs available that can influence family life and that are appropriate for military families.

One of these programs is the Marriage Encounter program that builds on the art of parental communication. Another is the Family Cluster Education with its focus on values clarification and total religious education. The Parent Effectiveness Training and Effective Parenting Programs are worthy of note for they facilitate family communication and teach skills most useful for family life. The Family Enrichment program where parents and children attend classes, receive resource materials, and work on projects together at home, is a meaningful thrust that involves all members of the family and teaches them to work together as a unit.

The Families For Prayer provides still another option. In the Introduction to the Organizational Manual of the Families for Prayer Program, published in 1977 by the Hollywood-based organization, it is stated: "The program aims to help families, through sharing and praying together, to become more aware of Christ living among them and strives to deepen each member's relationship with one another in Him". This program has met with enthusiastic response.

Resources are available. Many churches have their own unique programs for family religious education. The Office of the Army Chief of Chaplains releases information about available programs. The Endorsing Agencies for the military chaplains have made available resource materials, ideas, and people for family religious education.

Today the military chaplain recognizes the importance of family religious programs and should emphasize their significance in the home. He knows that military families can benefit from these well-planned and executed family-centered religious education programs. Such programs are the strongest of modern approaches, not only because they educate in values but also because they touch the family itself. The family religious education program can restore and enrich a family centered life.

As chaplains we talk a lot ABOUT the family, but we don't talk to THE family effectively. Any significant and lasting growth in values most take place, for military and civilian people alike, in the context of the family.

Determining the particular program of family-centered religious education that best meets the needs of a specific group or area, requires experimentation. It requires a chaplain who is a pastoral leader with vision, who is committed to family and willing to familiarize himself with available options. It requires a chaplain willing to bring his people to recognize the hunger that is theirs for programs with substance. Free dialog with families can open the door to creative options. They usually know well their needs. Obviously the final models have not yet been designed or perfected nor have all options yet been tried.

As an educator, planner, preacher, and counselor, the chaplain is called to encourage families to identify and build on their
own strengths. The chaplain must provide the knowledge and skills
for he is the leader; he is to motivate, encourage and provide
support as families struggle to draw upon their own God-given
resources for dealing with the pressures of contemporary family
life. Too often families rely on outside support for assistance
because they have not been helped to recognize their own unique
and special God-given gifts. The church is only the instigator
of the long process of building that happens as people begin to
recognize their God-given gifts. Hopefully, family religious
education programs can facilitate such recognition.

Recently an Interdenominational Group of Church Leaders issued a statement on the Goals for the White House Conference on Families. I think the final paragraph of that Interdenominational statement provides a fitting finale for this paper:

"For a brief period of perhaps a couple of years, the spotlight of serious public attention may be focused on the family's importance as the oldest and most basic of all our social institutions. If this time could be used to reassess and readjust our family programs and policies, the gains could well prove to be incalculable. It is therefore our opinion that no effort should be spared to insure the success of the (White House) conference in achieving this vital task. In conclusion, we would express the hope that the conference will also give recognition to the fact that, again and again in the history of our nation, the dynamic for loving and caring families has been provided by the uplifting and sustaining power of religious faith." 17

It is the military chaplain who is called to provide that uplifting and sustaining power of religious faith through family-centered education. My years of experience as Pastor, University Chaplain, Educator and Military Chaplain have convinced me that the family focus is the best.

NOTES

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